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ELECTION OF SPEAKER.

REMARKS

OF

HON. ALEX. C. M. PENNINGTON,

OF NEW JERSEY,

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, JANUARY 12, 1856,

Upon Interrogatories propounded by Mr. ZOLLOCOFFER to certain gentlemen who had been voted for, for Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Mr. RICHARDSON, Mr. BANKS, and Mr. FULLER, having addressed the House on the subject—

Mr. HUMPHREY MARSHALL suggested that the gentleman from New Jersey [Mr. PENNINGTON] had been voted for, and that he, too, should be heard upon these interrogatories. [Laughter. Cries of "Call the roll!" and "PENNINGTON!" in the midst of much confusion.]

Mr. BARKSDALE obtained the floor at the moment Mr. PENNINGTON addressed the Chair.

THE CLERK. Will the gentleman from Mississippi yield to the gentleman from New Jersey?

Mr. BARKSDALE. I yield to Mr. PENNINGTON.

Mr. PENNINGTON said :

MR. CLERK: My friend from Kentucky [Mr. MARSHALL] takes me entirely by surprise. I certainly could have had no expectation, when I came to the Hall to-day, that any gentleman could think of calling for a response to the interrogatories propounded yesterday by the honorable gentleman from Tennessee [Mr. ZOLLOCOFFER] from a candidate so obscure and unpromising as myself. [Laughter.] Why, sir, he should recollect that I am wholly cut off the *triangle*—this political *pons asinorum*, over which the very ingenious and accommodating body of gentlemen around me, with the aid of the most skillful of engineers, have been fruitlessly struggling to effect a safe passage for the last five weeks. [Bursts of laughter.] I thought I could discover

in the merry twinkle of my friend's eye, as he called for my response, the triumphant anticipation of a capital joke at my expense; but I am not to be caught so easily, I assure him. If indeed, he could have entrapped me into a serious exposition of my political principles, for this occasion, with no better show of success than my little band of six or seven, he might well have boasted of the best joke of the season. [Renewed laughter.] It was the great Napoleon, I believe, who said, "there is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous." With a lively disposition to extend every reasonable accommodation to my friend, I must beg leave to decline most respectfully to take that particular step just now. [Laughter.]

Besides, sir, I have not been served with the interrogatories! [Laughter.] I believe it was understood yesterday that the candidates who were expected to answer were to be served with copies of the catechism; and it would seem that all the triangular candidates have been duly served, and have thus had ample opportunity to prepare their responses: while no such respect has been paid to your humble servant. [Laughter.] I must enter my solemn protest against being taken at such disadvantage, and under such circumstances. I appeal to every high-minded gentleman to say whether I am not bound by a proper self-respect to assume a dignified reserve?

But to be serious, Mr. Clerk, I propose to avail myself of this occasion to say to the House and the country what I should have been glad to have said long ago, if a fit opportunity had been presented to do so, in explanation of the part which I have borne in this contest. The position which I have been made to occupy has been, to me, for some time past, extremely irksome, and, in some degree, involuntary. Though apparently a candidate, it is well known to my more intimate friends, and to many, if not most, of the members of the House, that I am not such in the proper sense of that term. I have had, from the first, no aspiration for the office of Speaker; but, on the contrary, have shrank, with unfeigned self-distrust, from the difficulties and responsibilities of the position. At the commencement of the session, in view of the peculiar elements constituting the present House, since so clearly developed, I yielded a reluctant consent to the use of my name in this connection upon the urgent solicitations of friends, both here and elsewhere, in whose judgment and disinterested patriotism I have reason to confide, with no purpose, either on their part or on mine, other than to facilitate the organization. I assert no claim to such an elevation. I have solicited no support. I have no desire to obstruct, nor will I for a moment allow myself to stand in the way of, an adjustment of the difficulties which surround us. I feel sure that every gentleman here will do me the justice to say, whatever injurious insinuations to the contrary may have found their way into the public prints, that I am in no measure, beyond any other member of this body, responsible for that delay in our action which has excited the just indignation and disgust of the country. I am ready to co-operate in any effort that may promise to relieve us from our embarrassment. The public business is suffering from the obstinate pursuit, on all sides, of a contest which as yet holds no promise of victory to either, but only continued disadvantage to the public interests.

Sir, I am heartily tired of this fruitless struggle; and attaching less consequence to the choice which we shall make than many of those around me, I am

prepared, after so much delay and difficulty, to cast my vote for any gentleman, on any side of this House, whose election may be effected by such aid. From the first moment of the session I have been anxious for the organization. I have not been, by any means, particular in my choice among the candidates in opposition to the Administration. On the first three trials I voted successively for the gentlemen from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts, [Messrs. CAMPBELL, FULLER, and BANKS,] indicating, at the outset, my willingness to contribute to the election of either of those gentlemen. The gentleman from Ohio [Mr. CAMPBELL] knows—for he had the amplest assurances to that effect—that my vote and those of my colleagues were at his command at any moment when they would have secured his election, up to the time of his withdrawal from the contest. He asked no complimentary votes, and was satisfied to wait for ours till they could render him a more substantial service. I deem this a proper occasion to say, not only that he was my first choice, but that I was, and still am, of opinion that he was eminently entitled to this honor by the distinguished ability and unwavering fidelity with which he had served his party and his country.

After his withdrawal, (an act as graceful as it was honorable and self-sacrificing,) I declined the offer of a large body of friends to press my name upon the attention of the House. I gave way to the gentleman from Massachusetts, [Mr. BANKS,] and, at the first moment when it seemed practicable to elect him, my vote and those of my colleagues were cast in his support; and from that moment to this we have ever been ready to contribute to that result. It is true that the gentleman from Massachusetts was, for many reasons, unacceptable to us, and that much has been said and done in the progress of this contest, on the part of his friends, (for which, however, we do not hold him responsible,) calculated to alienate us from his support. It is true that we have not concurred with our judgments, though we have by our votes, in the pertinacious effort which has been made to elect that gentleman; nor have we been willing to take the gentleman from Illinois [Mr. RICHARDSON] as the only alternative to the gentleman from Massachusetts—a line of policy which has been urged upon the Opposition in this body with a dogmatism only equaled by its absurdity, and the malign spirit which dictates it. The rule of conduct adopted, in this respect, by my colleagues and myself, was adopted also by all who were originally my friends, and we have been found united for more than a month, contrary to our convictions of sound policy, in an effort, as yet unavailing and inauspicious, to elect the gentleman from Massachusetts.

In the mean time, while my name has remained in nomination, the votes of six gentlemen, not originally my friends, and having now, as I presume, no special preference for me, but unwilling to vote for the gentleman from Massachusetts for reasons satisfactory to themselves, upon their own representative responsibility, have been concentrated upon me in good faith; and it seems to be well understood that no one of these gentlemen can be brought to the aid of the gentleman from Massachusetts, though I should peremptorily decline their support.

Under this state of facts, it is suggested that I should decline; and telegraphic dispatches have been transmitted in every direction to create a public

impression that I am an obstacle to the organization, and, by thus placing me in a false position, to constrain me to a course of action which does not commend itself to my convictions of duty or honor, with a design, as it seems to me, not so much to promote the election of the gentleman from Massachusetts as to embarrass those who have thus honored me, and, in my name, held out to the friends of that gentleman the olive branch of conciliation and peace.

Sir, I need no suggestion from any quarter to press on me considerations of public duty or personal interest in relation to this or any other subject. I have not been quite so passive a spectator of this contest as to have been inattentive to such considerations. I need no monitor to remind me of my duty or my interests; least of all, such a monitor as has set himself up to instruct the members of this House in the line of their duty, and to hold it in awe by the lash of a powerful press. I am the keeper of my own honor, and I shall judge for myself, fearless of open denunciations or covert insinuations, come from what quarter they may, what my obligations are to myself, to my constituents, and to my country. And I have now to say, once for all, that whenever it shall appear to me that the continuance of my name in nomination shall have even a tendency to delay the organization, I shall, without a moment's hesitation, ask my colleague who placed it there to withdraw it. It will cost me no sacrifice to do so: for, if I had ever indulged any desire for success, I have long ceased to look upon it as probable, or even practicable. Till then I shall continue to occupy the position which I have maintained hitherto, from the beginning of the contest. I shall, in that event, be enabled to present to those gentlemen who have thus concentrated their votes upon me, a reason for declining their support, the force of which, I doubt not, they will be among the first to appreciate. In the absence of such a reason, I should be guilty of a gross dereliction of honor and good faith, and unworthy the respect of my peers in this body, if I were thus contemptuously to shake the dust of my feet in the faces of those gentlemen. It has been intimated that I might purchase position in this House and before the country by withdrawing my name from the contest. Sir, I ask no position, in the House or elsewhere, to which I am not justly entitled. I wish to earn for myself no factitious importance; least of all, to do so at the expense of my own self-respect, and the sacrifice of my own honor.

Now, sir, I pass to the matter of the interrogatories. I have not read them. I have heard them read but indistinctly at the Clerk's table. They involve, if I correctly understand their general tenor, questions of grave importance, demanding for a response deliberate consideration. Of course I could not be expected now to respond to them; and I am free to say that, had I examined them, I could not, under present circumstances, be induced to trouble the House with any reply. It will be time enough for me seriously to consider the propriety of answering these, or any other interrogatories, when there shall appear to be a more general purpose seriously entertained to use my name in this contest.

Sir, I am no party to the contract implied by the resolution of the gentleman from Tennessee, and the vote which has been given in support of it. I voted to lay the resolution on the table, and, that failing, I voted squarely against its adoption. I am, therefore, in no measure responsible for its

passage, nor in any degree committed to the line of conduct which it indicates. I agree most fully to the general principle affirmed by the resolution; but, as I view it, that principle has no applicability to the business now before the House. The Speaker of this body is selected to preside over its deliberations, to conduct its proceedings, and to preserve order and decorum—functions which in no respect involve any political principle. They involve the principles of personal integrity, impartiality, and capacity, and, on these points, I have only to say, that, if the general tenor of my life and conversation, open to all men, and my intercourse with the members of this House, do not afford sufficient guarantees in these respects, they are as free to reject as they are to elect.

It may be said, Mr. Clerk, that the Speaker has in his power the appointment of the committees of the House. This may or may not be so. There is no existing law, rule, or resolution, which vests this authority in that officer.

When we shall have elevated to the chair any honorable member of this body to preside over its deliberations—when we shall have committed to such member the preservation of order and decorum, the proper time will have arrived to determine whether his character and principles be such as to justify us in intrusting to him so important and responsible a power.

But, sir, if it were true, that by any existing regulation the Speaker would *ex officio* possess the power to appoint the committees, or it be contemplated, according to established usage, to vest that power in him, I do not see how the principle enunciated by the resolution could have any proper relation to the selection of that officer. The duty of the Speaker, in the appointment of committees, is fixed by a well-defined, though too often disregarded, principle of parliamentary law. He would be bound by that principle, and ought, and doubtless would be required, under the pain of removal, whatever might be his individual opinions or personal preferences, to constitute the standing committees upon the various branches of the public service in conformity to the ascertained sentiments of a majority of the House. It is a rule of parliamentary law, equally well defined—though this, too, has been too frequently disregarded—that select or special committees are to be constituted of a majority at least of the friends of the measure referred to them, however odious it may be to the House or to its presiding officer. I confess, therefore, that with these views I cannot see the necessity or propriety of instituting an inquisition into the peculiar political opinions of candidates, especially with such extreme nicety as characterizes the points made by the interrogatories of the gentleman from Tennessee. It seems to me that enough ought to be known of any gentleman, fit for such a position, without subjecting him to the humiliation of submitting himself to be questioned and cross-questioned in this Hall as to all the minute points and phases of his political principles, and that, too, with all the little chicanery of the bar-room and the hustings. For myself, sir, I am satisfied to be judged, and to stand or fall, by my past political life, and the record which I have made in the public service; to which I beg leave to refer the inquisitive.

I will make no pledge, subject myself to no test, submit to no condition or humiliation to insure success.

And now, sir, not desiring further to occupy the attention of the House, I

have only to say again that, in my position and with my views, I most respectfully decline to be put through the catechism.

In conclusion, Mr. Clerk, I may illustrate my position by the point of an anecdote of boyhood days. It is now Saturday afternoon, and there are doubtless around me many who, with me, will associate, while life lasts, with that time vivid recollections of the delectable exercises in the smaller and larger catechism wherewith we were initiated into the rudiments of the Westminster Confession of Faith. I remember on one of these occasions to have been seated by a waggish youngster, who, upon being called up and asked what progress he had made in his catechism, very naively replied, that he had got beyond "effectual calling." [Roars of laughter.]

Mr. BARKSDALE. The interrogatories, Mr. Clerk, which I propose to put to the gentleman from Massachusetts, [Mr. BANKS,] I intend for all the gentlemen who are candidates for the speakership; and, in order that the House and the gentlemen to whom they are propounded may understand them, I will now read them:

Are you now a member of the American or Know Nothing party?

Are you in favor of abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia, the United States forts, dock-yards, &c.?

Do you believe in the equality of the white and black races in the United States; and do you wish to promote that equality by legislation?

Are you in favor of the entire exclusion of adopted citizens and Roman Catholics from office?

Do you favor the same modification—and this question I intend particularly for the gentleman from Massachusetts, [Mr. BANKS]—of the tariff now which you did at the last session of Congress?

Mr. BINGHAM. I insist that, before any more interrogatories are put, those which I have propounded be answered.

The CLERK. Does the gentleman from Mississippi withdraw his interrogatories for the present?

Mr. BARKSDALE. No, sir.

Mr. RICHARDSON took the floor.

The CLERK. Does the gentleman from Mississippi yield to the gentleman from Illinois?

Mr. BARKSDALE. I do, sir.

Mr. RICHARDSON. I wish to answer the question propounded.

Mr. KENNEDY, (interrupting.) I ask whether it is in order to put one or two more interrogatories in addition to those propounded by the gentleman from Mississippi? I should like to know of each candidate for the speakership, including my friend from New Jersey, [Mr. PENNINGTON,] whether he believes in a future state or not? [Laughter.] And then, provided he answers that question affirmatively, I desire to know whether he believes it will be a free or a slave state? [Roars of laughter.]

Mr. BARKSDALE. I would say to the gentleman from Missouri [Mr. KENNEDY] that, if he intends by that interrogatory to cast any reflection upon me

either directly or indirectly—[excitement, and cries of “No! no!”]—I hurl it back with all the scorn, derision, and contempt which its insolence and impudence so justly merit. [Loud cries of “Order!” “Order!”]

Mr. CAMPBELL, of Ohio. I call the gentleman to order.

Mr. BARKSDALE. Sir, he has no right to call me to order; and I demand by what right he calls me to order? [Continued cries of “Order!” and much confusion in the Hall.]

Mr. CAMPBELL. I again call the gentleman to order.

Mr. GROW. I move that the House do now adjourn.

Mr. KENNERT. I have only to remark, Mr. Clerk, that the tenor of my questions must have been misunderstood by the House, if it thinks they were designed to reflect on the gentleman from Mississippi, [Mr. BARKSDALE.] They were intended good-naturedly. And I have to say further, that no gentleman in this House, or out of it, need expect to intimidate me, or to insult me in this manner. I have made all the apology, Mr. Clerk, that I intend to make. That apology was made to the House. I did not intend my remarks to be understood in any but a jocular way; but I consider, at the same time, that the remarks made by the gentleman [Mr. BARKSDALE] about Americanism fully justify me in putting such a query. [Cries of “Good!” “Call the roll!”]

Mr. PENNINGTON rose and said: Mr. Clerk, I happened to be out of my seat, in the lobby, when my friend from Missouri, at the close of my remarks, propounded the theological questions which seem to have so much disturbed the gentleman from Mississippi. My attention has only this moment been called to them, and I take the first opportunity to reply.

My friend desires to know of each of the candidates for the speakership, and particularly of his friend from New Jersey, whether he believes in a future state; and, if that question be answered affirmatively, whether he believes it will be a free state or a slave state.

Now, sir, I have no hesitation in answering these questions; for, as the House knows, I am somewhat conversant with the Westminster Catechism, and ought to be able to instruct my friend from Missouri. [Laughter.] I have been taught, by that catechism, that there is such a thing as a future state, and I pledge my friend, upon my honor, that I religiously believe it. [Renewed laughter.] I do not understand, however, that it is wholly a free state, nor yet, on the other hand, wholly a slave state. It is represented as divided into two states—a free state, and the other a slave state. [Rise of laughter.] We are informed that these states are divided by an impassable gulf—not exactly a conterminous line, I believe. [Continued laughter.] We are frequently reminded, too, that one of these states is much the better of the two, and hence I take it for granted, as a matter of safe inference, that it is a slave state, and lies on the south side of the line. [Bursts of laughter.] I have never examined the geography of the country, but I think it safe to assume, upon the basis of the laws of population, that the state on the south side of the line has greatly the largest share of the territory—quite in keeping, I believe. Of one thing I beg to assure my friend, however, that I shall not dispute the settlement of



that part of the territory with him, nor raise any of the Wilmot proviso, or the principle of squatting. [Laughter.]

There are those, Mr. Clerk, who hold to a third state—a state of purgatory. Now, sir, upon that point, as I never found it in my primer, I am a Know Nothing. [Laughter.] But of one thing I am quite sure, that, whatever may be the fact as to the *future*, there is most decidedly a *present* state of purgatory, as all the candidates can attest, from their lively experience of the purgation they have undergone on this occasion. [Renewed laughter.] If I can be allowed to give in my personal experience, I may save some trouble by assuring the House that one of the candidates, at least, is past praying for. [Roars of laughter.]

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. Clerk, I would like to say one word in reply to the gentleman from New Jersey, who seems so well posted up in his catechism, and in regard to these future states—the northern and southern sides of the line, and purgatory. He has been kind enough to bind some of us hand and foot here, and pitch us into the dark place. I want to know of him, with regard to his catechism, whether, when he informed us that he had got beyond “effe-
ctual calling,” he was also able to see his “election sure?” [Roars of laughter.]

Mr. PENNINGTON. I owe the gentleman one. [Renewed and long continued laughter.]

Mr. PENNINGTON to Mr. KENNEDY, in an under tone. If it were not too irreverent, I should have told you that my reliance is in “the final perse-
verance of the saints.”

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